

A CONCISE HISTORY OF SIGNIFICS*

BY

G. MANNOURY

In the years 1920 and 1921, the well known philosophical and cultural journal *Mind* published an intensive discussion (a so-called "symposium") on "the meaning of meaning". The problem contained in this phrase soon became a "burning question" in world philosophical literature (c.f. the very thorough monograph by Ogden and Richards with the same title published in 1923). Although the somewhat vehement discussion on this question (which in our opinion is formulated in a narrower sense than it should be) did not lead directly to a definite result and after several years began to flag, scientific interest in the broader field of conceptual criticism in all its forms by no means abated, and led to the formation of centers of conceptual criticism in a number of countries, centers which independently of each other called attention to the shortcomings of human communication apparatus in order to avoid or minimize the dangers arising from these shortcomings.

The "centers" referred to differ widely both in external appearances and in their predominant direction of thought. It will not be possible to give a summary of the extensive literature in this field; but some of the most significant of these directions of thought ought to be briefly indicated here. We are inclined to distinguish three currents in the critical "awakening" of our times, which might be termed the analytic, the axiomatic and the relativistic psychological. We wish to emphasize though that this classification cannot be carried out strictly; nor can it be maintained that any of these centers exhibit a wholly one-sided domination of one of these standpoints.

While bearing this in mind, we think it is fair to characterize the critical current introduced by the *Mind* symposium and which has since spread throughout the English speaking world, as being preeminently analytic. In England and in America a great number of writers more or less directly inspired by Ogden and Richards have striven to demon-

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strate the great variability of many word meanings and have shown that a terminology predominantly emotionally and volitionally colored is unsuitable for the formulation of a reasonable expression of opinion for carrying on a fruitful discussion. Unquestionably a very useful task has so been accomplished, a task whose value, both for personal and social usage, can scarcely be overrated. Although it may be true that this idea has been expressed in previous periods (for example the "flatus vocis" of the thirteenth century philosopher Occam), a thorough study of the phenomenon in question has never been undertaken. Furthermore there has been perhaps no other period in which uncritical usage took on such a dangerous character as it did at the end of the past century and indeed still does today. This does not alter the fact that the Anglo-American current of thought (referred to by most of the writers of this school as semantics) places too much emphasis on the uncritical usage to which we have just referred and consequently has a tendency to attack the language of feeling and will itself, and to attach too much value to reason (which after all is only one of the directing factors of thought) as opposed to emotion and volition, whereby the propelling forces of our mental life are expressed. A good example of this one-sided approach is the unquestionably instructive and furthermore very witty book of Stuart Chase which had such a wide circulation both in America and outside and in which all forms of expression which do not have an exact and demonstrable "meaning" (in the narrow sense of the word) are branded as "blab-blab" and banned.

A second distinguishable critical current has a very different source, namely the Vienna Circle, which sprang from the school of Ernst Mach and was lead in the thirties by Hahn and Schlick. The thinkers belonging to this rather small and not completely homogeneous circle directed their attention not so much to general uncritical usage, but rather to the epistemological problems and philosophical theorems in which the true meaning (in the broad sense of the term this time) is buried under the all too customary flood of quasi scientific technical terms which are merely based on analogy and metaphor. It was with relentless sharpness that these thinkers and their successors (especially men like Wittgenstein, Carnap and Feigl) analyzed some of the problems and theorems and revealed the faults in their formulations. In this connection the concepts "pseudoproblem" and "pseudojudgment" originally introduced by Mach and defined more specifically by these writers proved to be extremely clarifying. While the terms indicating those formulations judging by their form, seemingly contain

a definite and well determined dilemma (choice problems and choice judgments) they actually only represent the emotional value whose acceptance or rejection is solely dependent on personal inclination and preference. This philosophical basis (one might say this positivistic basis) accounts for the fact that the Vienna Circle as well as the Anglo-American "Unity of Science Movement" (of which the late Otto Neurath was the enthusiastic organizer) had a broader basis than the line of thought of the "semanticist" proper, and that they did not restrict themselves solely to the negative side of conceptual criticism but also accomplished highly important constructive work. In view of the fact that in this constructive work they mainly insisted on the strict development of purely formulated logical systems preferably expressed in pasigraphic signs, we will here term this current as axiomatic (in addition to those we have named, Russell, Whitehead, Tarski and others must be considered forerunners in this field), even though the analytic features are often clearly visible and psychological considerations are completely absent both in the work of the positivists and in that of the semanticists. In recent years a group of American semanticists under the influence of the gifted Polish Count Korzybski (who in turn was greatly influenced by Brouwers' intuitionism to which we shall have occasion to refer later) have placed great emphasis on the significance of the psychological hierarchical structure of the forms of language and thought.

Nevertheless we feel that the principal difference between the two critical schools to which we have referred and the signific critical current which has been developed primarily in the Netherlands is the latter's high appreciation of the relativistic-psychological point of view. Most semanticists and positivists (with the exception of Korzybski's "Institute of General Semantics") more or less expressly reject the psychological standpoint, which seems to them too indefinite, too emotional, too "blabbistic" to serve as a point of departure for a sober scientific analysis of concept, thereby ignorning the fact that for the man of "sober science" the definite and the indefinite, the particular and the general, the indicative and the emotional ought to be of equal value as objects, even though in his own usage of language he will give preference to distinguishing rather than to valuing, and will prefer the mathematical form of thought to the ideological. This tendency to forget the difference between science itself and the object of science, between psychology and the mind, between conceptual criticism and the formation of concept has induced many writers to give the non-emotional forms of language of criticism and science a kind of monopoly

in other areas as well and has prompted them to defend that monopoly very emotionally.

It is no doubt due to this one-sided preference that the "Viennese" (as they are sometimes called even though this geographical nomenclature has not been applied for years) in particular have from the start assumed a strongly antireligious and antimetaphysical attitude which has alienated investigators of other schools of thought and has deprived themselves of the opportunity, especially useful to those engaged in conceptual criticism, of exchanging ideas with opponents: those who agree with you (the comment comes from the very religious but very unorthodox Father Van Ginniken) will understand you perfectly well without the least help from signifcics or semantics: a mere word will suffice for them; however conceptual criticism is useful and necessary, particularly in the exchange of ideas between groups separated from each other by ideological, social or, national differences ("inter-group communication", to use a technical term). We would add one condition, that the criticist must be able to shake off the group influences to which he is exposed (when this is useful and necessary) and place himself in a world of ideas and an affect distribution foreign to him. It should, of course, be borne in mind that this "placing of oneself" is always incomplete even with the best of intentions.

We hasten to add that we would not like to create the impression that "we signifcists" claim a monopoly we have denied others. Quite on the contrary, the standpoint we have just defended implies that we must realize that psychologism, "massal signifcics" and even the attempt to achieve unprejudiced objectivity involves certain dangers and that in any event the field of human communication phenomena is too extensive to be effectively attacked completely from one point of view.

In the foregoing we have spoken of conceptual critical centers formed in various countries independently of each other. On closer inspection however we have seen that immediate, if not direct relations, between the concepts and opinions predominant in these centers are demonstrable, and that the apparently independent conceptual critical movement which has developed in the Netherlands since the turn of the century and has eventually become known as the "Dutch Signifcists" owes its origin to a personal influence which also affected Anglosaxon "semantics" to an important extent: namely the powerful and vital stimulas at the turn of the century from Lady Victoria Welby, a very remarkable person from the standpoint of psychology and the

history of culture. Externally the stimulus consists only of a few short articles written by Lady Welby in the English journal "Mind" in 1896. Her line of thought and principal ideas were elucidated further a few years later in book form, which, however, contained no new points of view or any scientifical systematic development. The real content of these and several other shorter of her writings can, in effect, be summarized by stating three points of view from which the meanings of words (or broader: of language phenomena) can be viewed. The description of these points of view, though frequently repeated in different words and expressions, is rather vague. We will give a few examples from "What is meaning" (London, 1903):

There is, strictly speaking, no such thing as the Sense of a word, but only the sense in which it is used- the circumstances, state of mind, reference, "university of discourse" belonging to it. The Meaning of a word is the intent which it is desired to convey – the intention of the user. The significance is always manyfold, and intensifies its sense as well as its meaning, by expressing its importance, its appeal to us, its moment for us, its emotional force, its ideal value, its moral aspect, its universal or at least social range. (p. 6).

And more explicitly:

It must be remembered that Significs implies in more than one "sense" a careful distinction between sense, meaning and significance. This triad is found in many forms, of which perhaps one of the most striking comes from the East: "The Meaning (that may belong to a word) is held to be threefold, namely Express, Indicated, and Suggested. The Express meaning as that conveyed to the understanding by the (word's) Denotation; the (meaning) Indicated is held to be conveyed by the (word's) Suggestion. Let these be the three powers of a word" (the Vedantasara, edited by Colonel G. A. Jacob). We have already touched upon some forms of this triad, which may also be put as signification, intention and ideal values. From this point of view, the reference of sense is mainly instinctive, of meaning volitional, and of significance moral; we have a sense of discomfort, a thing is true in a certain sense, we mean (i.e. intend) to do something, and we speak of some event, "the significance of which cannot be overrated". (p. 46).

We believe we can, not unconditionally, express these points of view in our own words as that of general usage, that of the

particular intention of the speaker in a particular case and that of the broadest scope of the expression in question taken as a whole, not only in relation to the mental state of the speaker and hearer, but also to that of the social or cultural groups whose influence has been expressed on the "linguistic acts" or which have been subjected to their influence.

The three terms which Lady Welby connected with these points of view ("sense", "meaning" and "significance") have become common places in the literature on the subject and have been interpreted by Jacob Israel de Haan in a somewhat varying manner in a commentary which is well worth reading. The real "significance" of Lady Welby's work in our opinion is not the introduction of this worthwhile and somewhat arbitrary distinction, but rather the eloquent, one might well say passionate way in which she pleads the cause of a truly psychologically and sociologically oriented conceptual criticism and criticizes the slovenly and uncritical ways of expression (she spoke here of "misleading metaphors"), in which "the man in the street", as well as the scientific and philosophical world of her time indulged.

Her voice did not remain a voice crying in the wilderness. Lady Welby, whose aristocratic residence was a center of cultural life for many years, was able to win many of the most prominent of her contemporaries for her line of thought through her inspiring words. She offered a prize (in 1896) for an investigation as to the cause of the prevailing unclarity and confusion in psychological and philosophical terminology and as to how a change might be brought about. The offering of the prize was supported by a number of prominent people.

The text of the announcement of the contest follows:

"A prize of £ 50, to be called the Welby-prize, is offered for the best treatise upon the following subject:

The causes of the present obscurity and confusion in psychological and philosophical terminology, and of the directions in which we may hope for efficient practical remedy.

The donor of the prize desires that general regard be had to classification of the various modes in which a word or other sign may be said to possess "meaning", and to corresponding differences of methods in the conveyance or interpretation of "meaning". The committee of award will consider the practical utility of the work submitted to them as of primary importance".

Lady Welby did not receive a complete answer to this rather broad question, and this is not to be expected today, fifty years later. How-

ever the offering of the "Welby prize" led to the creation of an important monograph by the well-known German social psychologist F. Tönnies, Professor at the University of Kiel, entitled "*Philosophische Terminologie in Psychologisch-Soziologischer Ansicht*" (philosophical terminology from a psychological-sociological standpoint) in which the writer demonstrated the predominantly subjective nature of the usual, philosophical terms commonly assumed to be objective and urged the formation of an international organization for conceptual criticism. The work (which was published in full in English translation in "*Mind*") was rightly awarded the prize by the committee and contributed importantly to the continued reaction to Lady Welby's stimulation. She also had the satisfaction of being invited by the editors of the "*Encyclopedia Britannica*" to write an article on "significs". In this article she expressed the conviction that the drive for conceptual clarification, as expressed by that term, would become a social factor of the highest importance.

She did not live to witness the "*Mind*" symposium of 1920 to which we had referred above (she had died eight years earlier). The direct causal connection between this significant event in the history of culture and the work of Victoria Welby is unmistakable, though by the nature of the case, there are deeper causes underlying both events, causes which have led the entire world culture of the twentieth century in relativistic critical direction.

Lady Wellby's work also had a stimulating and fruitful effect in another direction, in that it brought her in contact with the young and enthusiastic Frederik van Eeden who was to become a close friend in her later life. Van Eeden made a strong plea for conceptual purification at a psychological-psychiatric congress held in London in 1892 and as a result was invited by Lady Welby to her castle Denton Manor, at Grantham, in Lincolnshire. A correspondence ensued from this visit (and other later ones) in which a deep community of spirit, but also many equally deep differences of opinion between the two partners was expressed. The latter is not at all surprising if one considers the great differences in social outlook that existed between the (despite her progressive views on conceptual criticism) extremely conservative and furthermore formally religious former lady-in-waiting to Queen Victoria and the fiery, somewhat Utopian revolutionary Van Eeden, whose half anarchistic Walden colony and whose active role in the railroad strike of 1903 had led to serious disturbances in the Netherlands. That these differences of opinion did not lead to a permanent estrangement is clear from the fact that Lady Welby shortly before her

death addressed the following words to Van Eeden, "I do trust you, if I trust anyone".

Van Eeden undoubtedly owed much to his relationship with Lady Welby especially in so far as her broad view of what we would now call the group character of the phenomenon of human communication is concerned: He repeatedly and with warmth told his friends so in later years. However he was not merely a talented and devoted disciple of Lady Welby but he added to her line of thought an element which was foreign to her work, namely, careful precision in the formulation of subtle distinctions and cautious deductions.

In a contribution to the Festschrift dedicated to Van Eeden on the occasion of his 70ieth birthday (1930) the author stated that he regarded him as the founder of the practical appliance of signific science in the Netherlands because Van Eeden was the first "to attempt to separate the volitional content, the emotional content and the indicative content of the most fundamental words and concepts in a systematic way and to weigh these against each other. He was also the first to recognize and expose the purely symbolic character of mathematical language and its relation to the living language of experiences and emotions". This judgment was primarily based on the broadly conceived and well thought out treatise published by Van Eeden in the years 1893 to 1897 as *Redekunstige Grondslag van Verstandhouding* (Logical Foundation of Communication) in the third volume of his Studies, which we believe to be a masterwork in significs.

The great merit of this work, which covered the entire field of the principal concepts of epistemology, in our view is not so much its logical construction (with 156 theorems, divided into 7 chapters, which however did not form a clear division of ideas), but rather its principle, which formed the basis of the work: namely "gradation" as Van Eeden expressed it or, in other words, the principle of the ultimate relatedness of all concepts. This principle compelled him, so to speak, to form a psychological conception even of apparently objective fields of science, such as mathematics and physics, and caused him to express himself in ways (e.g. "the words of mathematics are pure symbols" and "natural science aims at establishing order and connection in all our sensations") which anticipated the later relativistic development of the study of the foundations of mathematics and physics almost prophetically.

It would be too much to say that van Eeden never lost sight of this principle, which was so important to him or that he was able to free himself completely from the absolutistic dogmatic forms of

thought so dominant in his time. For, many passages, both in this and in his later works, indicate a certain tenacious retention of inherited "necessities of thought" (e.g. the "certainty" of the "existence" of the "ego", the "conviction" that there exists "a unity" and "something absolute", etc.), which are scarcely consistent with the principle of graduality, unless that principle is carried out "to the bitter end" and applied even to the gradual transition between the relative and the absolute, a consequence which we believe Van Eeden never fully realized. This shortcoming (at least if we should so refer to human imperfections) is amply compensated by many farreaching conceptual analyses (such as those of the concepts of truth and sincerity in theorems 45 and 46, culminating in the paradox "lies are usually made in good faith"), in which the writer succeeded in casting a bright light on the darkest corners of the confusion of concepts arising from the inconsistent use of language.

As far as can be ascertained, Van Eeden knew little concerning the stormy revolution in the foundations of mathematics and physics (for example of Einstein's theory of relativity, Brouwer's intuitionism and Heisenberg's uncertainty relations) until he once again took up the purification of the formation of concepts and conceptual criticism and sought and received the cooperation from others similarly interested.

We are now touching on a subject with which we are too closely connected to be able to judge impartially: the development of the signific "movement" in the Netherlands in the last thirty or forty years. We will, therefore, restrict ourselves to a summary of the events relating to it and will refer to a few works characteristic of the movement.

In 1917 Van Eeden, primarily in cooperation with L. E. J. Brouwer (the Brouwer to whom we referred above) and later with Henri Borel, H. P. J. Bloemers (who soon withdrew), Jacob Israel de Haan and the author formed an "Internationaal Instituut voor Wijsbegeerte" (International Institute for Philosophy) in Amsterdam, which conducted a series of lively discussions in the following five years and carried on a rather extensive correspondence with foreign scholars (Martin Buber, Erich Gutkind, Eugen Ehrlich, and Rabindranath Tagore). The original primary goal of developing an international Academy to realize Tönnies ideal and to further conceptual criticism through organized collaboration (we were thinking here of the creation of an epistemological dictionary in which the hierarchical structure of linguistic and thought forms, which we regarded as unmistakable, would be taken into account) was not reached. In 1922 the "Instituut"

was transformed into a "Signifische Kring" (Signific Circle) with a more modest program. This circle (in which the above named Father van Ginniken also played an active part) only lasted for a few years and it seemed as if the views held by its members excited no interest among their contemporaries. A multilingual journal published by the "Insti-
tuut" soon closed for lack of funds; other cultural or philosophical journals in the Netherlands did not pay the slightest attention to significs, semantics or communication psychology and the Signifische Kring could not even find a publisher for the book form of its "Signifi-
sche Dialogen" (Signific Dialogues). Ten years later though (may we not consider them as an "incubation period" which, according to Ziegler, all new ideas must undergo), a turn for the better occurred and it appeared from many symptoms that a more general need for conceptual criticism was developing which was not purely speculative and metaphorical. One of the most marked symptoms of this new awakening (which also was discernible in many foreign centers) was the publication in 1936 of the Journal "*Synthese. Maandblad voor het Geestesleven van onze Tijd*" (*Synthese. A Monthly for the Cultural Life of our Time*) whose Editorial Board took the initiative to form an "Internationale Signifische Studiegroep" (International Signific Study Group) which has attempted to carry on the work of the previous Signific Circle, but on a wider basis. Through the organization of an International Signific Summer Conference in 1939 the Study-Group reestablished and strengthened the ties with other countries. The Second World War disturbed the process to a considerable extent. Soon after the end of World War II *Synthese*¹ reappeared (in a completely international form) and a second International Signific Summer Conference was held, which this time was sponsored by various authorities in and outside the Netherlands.

For the rest, as we have already said, we do not feel competent to express an opinion on this school of thought in the Netherlands, that is still in its infancy. We will leave this task to the future.

¹ At the beginning of 1968 the General Editorial Committee changed the Journal's name to "*Methodology and Science*".